Long, winding road led to hope

Impoverished Lemon Hill area gets a club to give kids a boost.

By Terri Hardy -- Bee Staff Writer
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Rocio Mejia worries about her Lemon Hill neighborhood, an area she says is plagued with violence and drugs. Sylvia Lopez, who operates a day care center a few blocks away, has grown increasingly uneasy watching teens wander the streets every afternoon.

Those concerns made the opening ceremony Saturday of a newly-built Boys & Girls Club in their south Sacramento neighborhood more than a much-anticipated event. It was a signal, they said, of hope.

"So many kids have nothing to do after school, nothing to do but walk around from house to house," Lopez said. "Now the kids can come do their homework, do fun activities, and they won't get into trouble."

Mejia was so impressed that she signed up as a volunteer.

"I want to help change my community," she said. "This seems like a place that could make a difference."

Boys & Girls clubs offer after school instruction and fun to children age 6 to 18. The Teichert branch on Lemon Hill Avenue, the fourth Boys & Girls Club in Sacramento County, expects to serve 3,000 youngsters.

Civic leaders hailed the Lemon Hill building as a miracle: It took 10 years from inception to finished construction. But the monumental effort paved the way to turn around a struggling community.

"It matters for Sacramento, it matters for the neighborhood, it matters to each child who comes through the door," said Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo.

Lemon Hill is an area straddling the city/county line, roughly tucked between Stockton Boulevard and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Within its radius are more than 9,000 children -- and more than one out of every three live in poverty, according to a club report.

That made it a perfect location for the nonprofit agency which seeks to serve disadvantaged children, said Fred Teichert, a board member of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Sacramento, and the person who shepherded the project from the beginning.

Even though the Lemon Hill Avenue neighborhood had a great need, Teichert said he found that its location would pose many problems. Potential donors had never heard of the area, houses on the site had asbestos, and getting county rezoning and building approvals proved onerous.

Another large hurdle: At the time, no local contributor was really certain what a Boys & Girls Club was. Teichert said he ended up ferrying potential funders to other clubs throughout Central and Northern California to see for themselves.

The Lemon Hill facility had been intended as the first club site in Sacramento. But when funding and land became available in downtown's Alkali Flat, Sacramento's first Boys & Girls club was built there instead. But Teichert still championed the Lemon Hill area and three years ago, landed his first large donor -- his own Teichert Foundation. After its $1 million pledge, other contributions and government grants followed.

The nearly $7 million, 32,000-square-foot building includes a library, computer center, game room and a "kids cafe" that provides hot snacks. Kids can get help with homework, take a martial arts class, do a project in the art room, or just relax. It's

open every weekday and costs $12 each school year and an additional $12 for the summer.

Lopez's 10-year-old daughter, Olivia, went on a tour of the clubhouse last week with classmates from nearby Clayton B. Wire Elementary School.

Tongue-tied, Olivia just nodded and smiled when asked if she was going to join the Teichert branch. Her mother patted her back.

"She's shy. She's really excited about coming," Lopez said.

Kathy-Jean Lavoie, president of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Sacramento, said that despite the enormous struggle to get the Teichert branch built, the real challenge still faces them -- enabling young people to realize their full potential.

"It starts," Lavoie said, "at 2:30 Monday afternoon."

That's when children like Olivia enter the door.

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